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CONTEMPORARY FOUNDATION FOR VOCATIONAL EDUCATION: THE CONTRIBUTION OF PRE-PRIMARY AND PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

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The paper reviewed the present Nigerian Education System showing a distinction between general and vocational education. It highlighted how the current pre-primary and primary education of the pupils constituted a solid foundation for the realization of a functional vocational education and with suggestions for improvement.

INTRODUCTION

Until recently, Nigeria has been laying emphasis on general education inherited from the colonial system of education. Even today, the preference of many in the society has continued to be on the secular school system which emphasizes general education, yet we desired to be advanced technologically. General education as practised in the past at home in the case of pre-primary education and, in school for primary education offered, alongside it, an opportunity for the child in later life to accept and be trained vocationally. Presently, with the on coming elitist and laissez-faire attitudes towards education at the pre-primary and primary levels respectively, the trend has gradually changed. This paper examines the worthiness of vocational education and the contemporary foundation laid for this type of education at the pre-primary and primary levels of education in Nigeria.

THE CONCEPT OF VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

As put by Okoro (1993), vocational education refers to any type of education which is solely geared towards preparing persons for employment in recognized occupations. The basic thrust of this type of education is the provision of skills and specific behavioural attributes necessary for the chosen occupation. Infact, vocational education embodies trade, industrial, business, agricultural, home economics and health related education. From the above, it is clear that vocational education is distinct from general education because while the former equips people with specific skills, the latter does not lay emphasis on any particular occupation but prepares individuals culturally emphasizes those values, skills and knowledge which each citizen should have in order to understand the society in which he lives and play an intelligent part in its affairs. However, these two; vocational and general education, are interrelated but too much emphasis on general education does not lead to any indepth knowledge and productive practicability of acquired knowledge.

Further distinctions between the two could be seen in their features. While general education has teachers, lessons, classrooms and laboratories as features, vocational education has masters, apprenticeship schemes and workshops as its own features. Among principles identifies for vocational education, Roberts (1965) recognizes that the need for vocational education in a specific area were determined from the result of a community survey. This presupposes that vocational education is more responsive to the needs of the immediate society than general education. Okoro (1993:6) agrees with this and further states that "for every occupations, there is a body of content which is peculiar to the occupation and which practically has no functioning for indepth study instead of peripheral and smattering knowledge of this body of content.

For success to be achieved, the trainee has to be sufficiently ready for the chosen vocation. This calls for some preparation at the early stage of life in the form of general education in order to inculcate readiness for later achievement of vocational education. Although Okoro (1993) believes that vocational education should be started from the secondary level of education, psychologist such as Bee (1981), Biehler and Snowman (1982) and Mitchell (1984) acknowledge that a great percentage of adolescents' and adults' attributes have their origin from childhood. Thus, the contributions of the pre-primary and primary levels of education towards the successful achievement in vocational education should not be overlooked.

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY PRACTICES IN PRE-PRIMARY AND PRIMARY SCHOOLS

The introduction of formal pre-primary education is gradually gaining wide acceptance and it is acquiring age in Nigeria with every passing day. More and more people are also sending their children to schools such that the percentage of children who receive either pre-primary or primary education today in Nigeria falls within the last quarter of one hundred percent (100%). This awakened interest has been particularly

boosted by the intention of government to make education at the primary level free and compulsory (NPE, 1981).

However, the quality of the public primary schools, which are directly managed by the various arms of government, lack something desirable. Today, the tendency is for those who could afford it to turn their attention to the few private nursery and primary schools available with the hope of getting some levels of satisfactory education for their children. With both managements, government and private, is there any difference as far as the preparation of children to accept and engage in vocational education is concerned?

Starting from the public primary schools, the morale of the teacher has been lowered that he would do anything to acquire what would make him survive in the present economic situation in Nigeria. His salary can hardly last him for a fortnight, then his level of commitment to the job is adversely affected. In his teaching, he gives barely enough of what is required of him and does not pay attention to the effects of his lesson on the attitudes of his pupils.

For instance, craft which is expected to be the basic foundation to the child's practical experience is neglected. Quite often, pupils pay money as substitute for what they should have produced with their hands (brooms, cane chairs, baskets, coconut brush, carpets, and so on). Despite several warnings from the various state ministries of education, the practice of collecting money to replace "handwork" or "craft" or accepting bought items still continues. How then does the child acquire the required practical experience which is expected to prepare him for vocational education at the next stage of his education?

In Agriculture, teachers pay more attention to cultivating their personal farms than engaging in school agricultural projects. Because of this tendency, parents often react against the use of pupils by teachers to attend to their personal farms. Just as children find ways of averting engaging in crafts, this phenomenon offers pupils at the primary schools level escape routes from participating in practical agriculture. Agricultural science, as taught to pupils today in Nigerian primary schools, are to a large extent theoretically based.

The situation is slightly different in private schools but the result is equally non-practical experience for the pupils. From the private schools' point of view, most pupils start their formal education from the pre-primary level. Admittedly, children are very tender when they are admitted into the pre-primary section: Age three (3) but as Okonkwo (1992) puts it, attitudes formation is much better started from that age than in later life. Okonkwo (1992:2) reasons that the rationale for having a well planned and systematic stimulation "will prepare the child very well for his active participation in future, in the society to which he belongs, in the process of human resource development."

Children often continue from the pre-primary section into the primary section in the same type of school here, the social conception of this type of school is different. Parents who send their children to these schools conceive it that they pay extraordinary. Therefore, almost every service including the ones the child could have done himself like practical agriculture, cleaning his own classrooms and surroundings, has been paid and should be done for the child. Arising from parental expectation, the proprietors exempt the pupils from all sorts of manual work which could have helped them (the pupils) to develop useful skills.

Basically an elitist impression is created in them. All these come as a result of the proprietors' efforts to satisfy parents on one hand and win patronage on the other. Local craft in most cases is excluded from the curriculum. Agricultural Science is theoretically carried out and the impression cultivated in the child is that doing things personally with one's own hand is menial. These children therefore depend on househelps at home and only need the theoretical subjects in school. From the practices in our public and private primary schools and as far as laying a sound foundation for vocational education is concerned, one sees clearly that, the schools are doing every other thing expected of them except "giving the child opportunity for developing manipulative skills that will enable him function effectively in the society within the limits of his capability, the picture presented above cannot also be "developing in the child the ability to adapt to his changing environment" (NPE 1981). The level of provision of basic tools for further educational advancement in vocational education as well as the state of preparedness for trade and crafts of the locality are questionable. One would then dare to say that attitudinally, the contemporary practices of our primary schools, both public and private are NOT laying a favourable foundation towards increase participation in vocational education in Nigeria. One does not wonder then why people erroneously refers to general education as practised in Nigeria; Primary, Secondary, Tertiary levels of education.

THE WAY FORWARD

For contemporary Nigeria, pen is failing and white collared jobs, often achieved as a result of general education, could no longer "deliver the goods". All what seems an alternative is for people to be trained specifically for certain jobs while also building in them the possibility of adjustment into related areas of trade. With this realization, our foundation layers- the pre-primary and primary schools, have a great obligation to our children. It is their place to instill in the pupils dignity for labour. There is hardly any other way of doing this except to make the child do by himself and realise that he can achieve some level of productivity. The practical achievement of the child as Durojaiye (1981) observed provides in itself an intrinsic motivation for further actions.

In the light of the above, pre-primary institutions are not doing children and indeed Nigeria any good by not allowing children to be practical in the areas of craft, Agricultural science and Home Economics all in a false pretext of being elitist in approach. In stead, it is the schools responsibility to encourage pupils to go into practical, even to the 'dirtiest' practices of agriculture. Nevertheless, some measure of safety should be guaranteed to minimize health hazards. In this way elitism practised would promote leadership by good examples similarly, public primary schools should increase their involvement with their pupils especially in encouraging them to be practical and not treating anything which demands the use of the hands in production as being menial.

Since performance depends on the level of motivation, the government should realise that having teachers and not ensuring their commitment to the job is as good as having no teachers at all. It is time, adequate remunerating be paid to teachers so that they may settle down to face their work. In a situation where the teacher cannot be sure of his meals because his salary is insufficient for the month, the teacher is bound to find alternative means of income generation and his official jobs suffers. When the teacher is adequately motivated to work, he would need workshops and tools especially in the area of craft. These should be provided by the management in all schools except where these could be improvised. In all, the same level of commitment presently shown to subjects like English Language, Science and mathematics in our primary schools should be paid to these areas identified to form the basic foundation of vocational education so that our pre-primary and primary institutions may be seen as laying a solid foundation for vocational education.

CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed in detail the need for a balance between general educational and vocational education in our school system. It examined the role played by pre-primary and primary institutions in achieving readiness in children to engage in vocational education identified to be the bedrock of our technological advancement. The present situation has been observed as lacking stimulation and suggestions to increase this stimulation have been made. In all manual and practical experiences which will groom children in the direction of treating no job as mean, brought about by teachers active participation, is considered the way forward. With a change in attitudes, both on the part of the teachers and the corresponding changes in pupils, a solid foundation for vocational education will emerge. With this type of education, Nigeria's technological development and advancement would be a reality within the next decade.

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